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## **EFFECT OF USING TRUISMS OF DIFFERENT INVOLVEMENT LEVELS ON RESULTS PREDICTED FROM INOCULATION THEORY**

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Inoculation theory was first proposed by McGuire (1961) as a model to explain the resistance to persuasion of a belief when it is attacked and defended by various persuasive communications. It was subsequently amplified by him and others in a series of investigations (cf. McGuire, 1964, for summary). In all these investigations, the dependent variable used was the level of belief in one of four cultural truisms, which McGuire defined as "beliefs so widely held within the person's social milieu that he would not have heard them attacked, and indeed, would doubt that an attack was possible (p.201)."

Using as a model the medical process for protecting a person against a virulent disease by inoculating him with a weakened form of the germ, McGuire found that a strong attack on an undefended truism would result in the severe decline of belief in the truism, that communications which supported the belief would apparently increase the belief's strength but would prove to be "paper tigers" under a strong attack (ie, would not significantly halt the belief's decline over a control condition), and that only by presenting an inoculation against the forthcoming attack in the form of a refutational defense (short attack statements along with arguments refuting these attacks) would there be a significant lessening in the decline of the belief under subsequent strong attack.

Subsequent investigators have replicated many of McGuire's findings none, however, utilized cultural truisms other than those he originally uncovered, all of which concern health topics.

Involvement in a belief (or its importance to S) is a major parameter in attitude theory. Previous investigators using truisms have not manipulated this variable, nor have direct attempts been made to uncover truisms that might differ in involvement level from those used by McGuire. Pilot research indicated that these health truisms were uniformly of low involvement level.

Four hypotheses were derived from previous research models that appeared to predict differential results from those of Inoculation theory for low-and high-involvement truisms.

Hypothesis 1. After an undefended attack, a low-involvement belief declines more from its initial position than a high-involvement belief.

Hypothesis 2. A refutational defense prior to an attack significantly increases the resistance to persuasion of a low-involvement belief,

Hypothesis 3. After an attack on a high-involvement truism that has received a refutational defense, the belief level rises above that found in a control group not exposed to any experimental treatment (a "boomerangs effect).

Hypothesis 4. A low-involvement truism increases in belief level after receiving a supportive defense, when compared to a control group that has received no defense, However, under attack, the final belief level of this group is not significantly different from a group that has received no defense prior to the attack (a paper tiger effect), A high-involvement truism does not exhibit this increase-decrease pattern, and therefore does not exhibit a paper tiger effect.

## METHOD

One-hundred and ten seventh- and eighth-grade students were administered a Belief Questionnaire to locate statements that would qualify as cultural truisms. An operational definition was adopted (Isaacs, 1970) that a cultural truism would be a statement whose mean level of belief ("How correct do you think this statement is?") was Mean  $\geq$  11.25, and whose mean level of exposure to counterargument ("How often have you heard arguments against this statement?") was Mean  $\leq$  4.75, on a 15-point scale similar to that used by McGuire (1964), The Ss were also asked about their involvement in the statement ("How much do you care whether the statement is true or not?').

Two statements were chosen for the present research on the basis that (a) they fulfilled the above operational requirements and did not differ from each other on these two scales (level of belief and level

of counterargument), and (b) they did differ significantly from each other in involvement level.

The two statements were "Everyone should get a yearly chest X-ray to detect any signs of TB at an early state" (low-involvement truism), and "A good education is necessary to success in life" (high-involvement truism). Attacks and defenses were then constructed for these beliefs, as were four neutral communications.

Two months after the initial questionnaire had been administered, booklets incorporating these attacks and defenses were distributed, A  $2 \times 3 \times 2$  factorial design, including two levels of involvement (high and low), three levels of defense (no defense, supportive defense, and refutational defense), and two levels of attack (no attack and attack) were used.

## RESULTS

To test Hypothesis 1, an analysis of variance was performed on the change scores for each S. Hypothesis 1 stated that after an undefended attacks a low-involvement belief declines more from its initial position than a high-involvement belief, This was strongly supported in that the interaction of Inv X Att was significant at the  $.02 < .01$  level. A t-test of each truism against its control group showed that the low-involvement truism decreased significantly after the attack, while the high-involvement truism did not.

Hypothesis 2 stated that a refutational defense prior to an attack significantly increases the resistance to persuasion of a low-involvement truism. A comparison of the no defense/ attack group with the refutational defense/attack group yielded  $t = 1.22$ ,  $n = 20$ ,  $.15 > p > .10$  in the predicted direction. Although not statistically significant, this was in the direction reported by McGuire (1964).

Hypothesis 3 stated that after an attack on a highinvolvement belief that had received a refutational defense, the belief level rises above that found in a control group not exposed to any experimental treatment (a "boomerang" effect), A direct test of this hypothesis by comparing the refutational defense/attack group with the no defense/no attack group yielded  $t = .81$ ,  $n = 70$ ,  $p > .10$ . which was not significant although in the expected direction. However, comparing the low-involvement truism in this condition with the high involvement truism did yield a significant difference. The low-involvement truism suffered a decline of - 1.8 points compared to its no defense/no attack

control groups the high-involvement truism attained a net increase of +0.4 compared to its control This 2.2 point difference between the net outcomes of attacks on refutationally defended low- and high-involvement beliefs was significant at the .05 level ( $n = 20$ ,  $t = 2.08$ ).

This difference, then, tends to support a "boomerangs effect, Although the contrast effect on the high-involvement belief was apparently not great enough to raise it significantly above its own control, it was more than enough to counteract the effect of the attack when compared to the effect of the attack on the low-involvement group, It may thus be said that some evidence of a boomerang effect was exhibited by the high-involvement truism.

Hypothesis 4 predicted that a supportive defense apparently increases the strength of belief in a truism for a low-involvement belief but not for a high-involvement ones this apparent increase does not offer protection to the low-involvement truism against a subsequent attack (a "paper tiger" effect).

In comparing the low-involvement group that had received only a supportive defense, with the low-involvement group that had received a supportive defense followed by an attack, some support for an increase in belief strength was demonstrated ( $n = 70$ ,  $t = 1.75$ ,  $.10 > p > .05$ ). That this was only an apparent increase in strength was shown by the comparison of the group that had received a supportive defense/attack against the no defense/attack group, where no significant difference was found.

The high-involvement supportive defense/no attack group showed this apparent increase over its no defense/no attack control to a much smaller extent ( $n = 70$ ,  $t = 1.10$ ,  $.20 > p > .15$ ), and therefore provided much less support for a paper tiger effect.

## DISCUSSION

It does appear that involvement is a significant parameter in the reactions of cultural truisms to various defenses and attacks. Although the findings do not all support the hypotheses, they do have significant implications for Inoculation theory as presently constituted.

(a) A high-involvement truism does not exhibit a significant loss in belief level after an undefended attack, while a low-involvement truism does.

(b) There is a tendency toward a boomerang effect when a high-involvement belief is first given a refutational defense and then attacked, There is only a decreased lessening in belief level for the low-involvement truism.

(c) The high-involvement belief exhibits much less tendency toward a paper tiger effect than does the low-involvement truism.

Drawing on the social judgment model of Sherif, Sherif, & Nebergall (1965), it might be heuristically assumed that an identically designed attack would fall within the latitude of noncommitment for a low-involvement belief and within the latitude of rejection for a high-involvement belief.

If this is so, one might anticipate that a high-involvement belief would exhibit a boomerang effect, would show a greatly lessened decline even under an undefended attack, and would have a lessened paper tiger effect when compared to a low-involvement belief. Having obtained evidence to support these predictions then, it might be stated that Inoculation theory may be extended through its merging with social judgment theory.

There are practical implications of this position. It is possible that there exist sub-cultural truisms (ie, statements that are truisms within various subcultures, although not for the population as a whole). For small-town youth, the statement that "narcotics are harmful" might be one such sub-cultural truism. If it were desired to protect this belief against subsequent attack, the present Inoculation model would suggest that the only way to do this would be to present refutational defenses against the attacks and hope that this would lead to a decreased lessening of belief when the attacks finally came. In line with the present investigation, it is suggested that increasing S's involvement with the belief would have a synergistic effect; an attack on the belief might then be expected to result in a boomerang effect, leaving the belief after the attacks stronger than before, Further research may produce fruitful extensions to areas of social relevance.

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